

Book Review: Foucault on Politics, Security and War

Carl Packman reviews an undeniably timely introduction to Michel Foucault's complex research on political modernity.

Foucault on Politics, Security and War. Michael Dillon and Andrew W Neal. Palgrave Macmillan. January 2011.

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When we look at the kinds of academic conversations that have developed in light of 9/11 and the war on terror, we frequently stumble upon the notion that war is a method used to sustain the whole of life itself, not just abstract nationhood. Such discourse has gained traction of late with the [killing of Osama bin Laden](#), and much of it leads back to the work of [Michel Foucault](#), particularly his research on biopolitics.

His lecture series, including the well known [Society Must Be Defended \(1975-6\)](#), which the volume by [Michael Dillon](#) and [Andrew W. Neal](#) focuses on, has been extremely influential in modern political theory, but it did not pass without criticism. As Dillon notes in his introduction "all the essays in this volume attempt to ... pick over the conflicts [Foucault's lectures had] with his previous thought".

One of the aims of the book is to place Foucault's lectures within contemporary discourse, while exploring Foucault's research methods. Under discussion throughout is how modern politics from the seventeenth century onwards arose as the extension of war. For Foucault, wars are increasingly waged as a struggle on behalf of the whole of existence; what he calls 'Make Live'. Further to this shift, biopolitics and biopower relations (what Foucault termed the application and impact of political power on all aspects of human life) made race, colonialisation and empire central to all conflict, and so it remains.

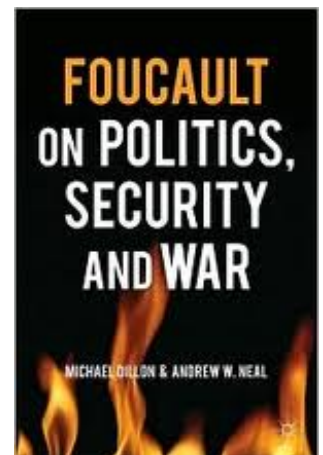
Andrew Neal, in his essay on exceptionalism (the notion that at certain times unusual or extraordinary actions or events need to occur not necessarily within the confines of normal rules or the law), discusses Foucault's view of biopower in relation to the war on terror. The main rub, for Neal, quoting from an article by Rob Walker and Karena Shaw, is that we are in danger of perceiving "the outrageous [as] the normal," when it comes to sacrificing civil liberties and human rights in these times of heightened security.

What the collection seems to do rather well is re-contextualise Foucault. As he says in [The History of Sexuality vol. 1](#), "one has to become capable of killing in order to go on living – [this] has become the principle that defines the strategy of states". When you consider this against how today's politicians frame the war on terror, as a task of not simply killing an enemy, but for the continuation of biological life, we begin to see how intuitive Foucault was, and how timely this volume is.

There are a number of things missing from the critique however. Despite the book's aim of putting Foucault's work under the microscope, not enough has been done to question his views on race. In the final essay of the volume it was noted that for "liberal biopolitics to govern effectively, [government and security forces] had to understand "Life". For Foucault the fear that government could never understand "Life" was often expressed in racial terms. Moreover, as governmental technologies develop, so race becomes more of a focal point for the "regulation of populations and the promotion of species existence". However these claims make great leaps without so much as a justification for them, and a critical analysis of those claims is lacking.

Undeniably the book has succeeded in being timely, and a great introduction, albeit a critical one, of Foucault's complex research on political modernity. But the book as a whole seemed only to be able to unpack the lectures, not unwrap them and take them apart as it promised to do in the introduction. Lastly, much more could have been done, particularly by Andrew Neil, to discuss what alternatives Foucault foresaw to the dystopia of political modernity. For a controversial conversation, situating Foucault's interest, philosophically as well as politically, in radical Islamism and the Iranian revolution would have made for interesting reading.

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